

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
PLANNING COMMISSION
Minutes of May 5, 2021
Planning Commission Meeting

In keeping with Governor Phil Scott's COVID-19 "stay at home" directive, the meeting was held remotely.

The meeting was called to order at 7:01 pm by Chair Hill-Eubanks.

Roll Call: Present for the meeting were Commissioners Laura Hill-Eubanks, Ruth Ruttenberg, Nancy Peck and Aaron Rhodes. Chandra Blackmer was absent. Also present were Clerk Mitch Osiecki; Jon Ignatowski, Northfield Economic Development Director, and resident Gordon Bock.

Public Participation: Introductions were made and guests were welcomed to the meeting.

Set/Adjust Agenda: None

Zoning District Discussion: Jon Ignatowski led a discussion of the zoning district encompassing Freight Yard Way. This area is currently designated as Industrial. Jon believes this area has a great deal of potential and should be a featured development area.

There is currently a review underway to consider the potential for upgrading municipal water to this area.

Potential uses for this area include Commercial, Mixed Use and Residential.

The current regulations allow for residential development in an Industrial District, which is a relatively unusual combination.

Some properties in this neighborhood have already been redeveloped as commercial properties. Gillespie Fuels is currently the only "traditional" Industrial use still in operation in this area.

Jon is curious as to the vision of the PC with regard to the development of this neighborhood.

Similarly, there is an old structure in Northfield Falls that was once an Industrial use.

Largely owing to the lack of municipal water and sewer in Northfield Falls, it's questionable whether Industrial is and appropriate use in Northfield Falls at present.

Ruth Ruttenberg spoke in favor of making development regulations friendlier to potential developers. Where practical, simplify regulations to make the process more predictable and smoother.

Nancy Peck agreed, and stated that she likes the idea of allowing Mixed Use in the Freight Yard Way area, particularly commercial use on the ground floor and residential use in upper floors.

Aaron Rhodes said he agreed in principal. He added that he's not certain that there's currently much demand for Industrial development.

Laura Hill-Eubanks led a discussion of the Area-Wide Plan. She wondered whether some uses envisioned in the Area-Wide Plan might preclude some residential development. She also cautioned that part of this neighborhood might be in the Flood Hazard Area. If not a Flood Hazard Area, some might still be wetlands.

Jon noted that common practice of municipal zoning is to site Industrial Districts away from waterways and residential neighborhoods.

It seems likely that this land is potentially lucrative real estate. From a development perspective, it would be sub-optimal to see this land returned to Industrial use.

One challenge will be to explore the need for remediation of any contamination, regardless of how the land is redeveloped, but especially so if residential development is favored.

Jon reiterated that the current Industrial designation is an historic relic, but he doesn't believe it is the best use for this land.

Ruth stated that she would be inclined to favor a flexible zoning designation so that the town can be as responsive as possible to potential development proposals.

Jon offered that if the PC wishes to allow for flexibility, it would be appropriate to allow "light industrial" as a use. The types of use that should be prohibited are industrial uses that create noxious odors or other externalities that would detract from a healthy and vibrant downtown.

Laura suggested that the PC review the Town Plan to see what types of uses might be allowed.

Jon commented that his recollection is that the Town Plan is pretty flexible.

Nancy added that her reading of the Town Plan allows general commercial of mixed uses in this area.

Jon commented that, if necessary, the Town Plan could be amended to explicitly allow development in line with this proposed vision.

Ensuing discussion led to the comment that a conversation with the Select Board would be appropriate early in the process, if only to ensure that there's some level of buy-in on the part of the SB before the PC invests a lot of time or effort on this.

Laura wondered about the appetite of residents for commercial vs. residential development.

Jon stated that commercial development is typically somewhat more lucrative than residential, largely because commercial development typically places a lower demand on municipal services. But he agreed that, to the extent practical, it would be preferable to remain flexible.

Jon concluded his remarks by stating that no specific development has been proposed, nor is any particular development imminent in the Freight Yard Way neighborhood. This project, if perused, would have a 2-3 year window or timetable.

Ruth stated that to the extent that there is interest in developing infrastructure, Northfield Falls is an area with considerable growth potential, but only if the town commits to extending water and sewer services to that area.

Jon departed at 7:43 pm.

Zoning Updates: Several Planning Commission members have had a chance to review the copy of zoning regulations stored as a google doc the shared PC folder, including inserting embedded comments.

A few highlights:

II.04 – Staggering of PC terms;

Page 12 - ?

Page 13 – LHE suggested requiring a Site Plan Review for all Conditional Uses.

Page 14 – Difference between a Waiver and a Variance (setback standards);

Organizational:

Motion: Ruth moved that Laura Hill-Eubanks be elected chair; Nancy seconded.

Motion passed, 4-0.

Motion: Nancy moved that Ruth Ruttenberg be elected vice-chair; Nancy seconded.

Motion passed, 4-0.

Motion: Ruth moved that Mitch Osiecki continue as secretary; Nancy seconded.
Motion passed, 4-0.

Approval of Minutes: Ruth moved to approve minutes of April 7; Nancy seconded.

Discussion: Mitch will double-check language of regulation change regarding maximum size of an Accessory Dwelling Unit, and correct April minutes as appropriate.

Other Business: Mitch was asked about apparent development at White's Heating on Route 12A, and also about a solar project being installed in the area of Route 64. Mitch will look into both and report back at June meeting.

Ruth reported that the Conservation Commission will be planting several trees in the downtown area on May 16.

Next Regular Meeting: June 2, 2021 at 7:00 pm.

Adjournment:

Meeting adjourned at 8:32 pm.